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ABSTRACT

Most textbooks for teaching foreign languages have as their basis a grammatical syllabus. The theory has been that it is easier for students to learn a language if they are exposed to one part of the grammatical system at a time. Recently critics have questioned this theory, arguing that the grammatical syllabus fails to provide the necessary conditions for the acquisition of communicative competence. An alternate approach which has been suggested is to construct a situational syllabus which would focus upon teaching what is most relevant to a particular group of learners. If teaching were based on particular types of situations, however, all of the learner's language needs would not be met. A possible solution is the creation of a semantic or notional syllabus which would consider the content of probable utterances and from this determine which forms of language would be most valuable to the learner. The notional categories would be organized into two sections, the first made up of six semantico-grammatical categories: (1) time; (2) quantity; (3) space; (4) matter; (5) case; and (6) deixis. The second set is made up of eight categories of communicative function: (7) modality; (8) moral evaluation and discipline; (9) suasion; (10) argument; (11) rational enquiry and exposition; (12) personal emotions; (13) emotional relations; and (14) interpersonal relations. This notional framework is intended to provide the means by which a certain minimum level of communicative ability in European languages can be set up. (CFM)

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GRAMMATICAL, SITUATIONAL AND NOTIONAL SYLLABUSES*

1. Types of Syllabus

It has been pointed out a number of times' that although many of the changes that have taken place in language teaching have been motivated by developments in linguistics, the changes have paradoxically taken place in the methods rather than the content of teaching. A glance at the history of language teaching reveals enormous diversity of methodology over the years but a remarkable stability in the principles underlying the choice of language to be taught and its arrangement. Whatever the method, it has been assumed that units of learning should be defined in grammatical terms, although the precise sequence in which they occurred would be influenced by pedagogic considerations. The theory that such an approach is based on, whether it is explicit or not, holds that splitting the language into parts determined by the grammatical categories of the language has psycholinguistic validity. That is, the task of learning a language is made easier if one is exposed to one part of the grammatical system at a time. Mutatis mutandis traditional grammar/translation, audio-lingual and structural methods, for example, are all applications of this principle. Changes in content, where they occur, are sometimes extremely superficial. For a while it was fashionable to label the content "structures" rather than "grammar", but the content changed little, apart from a greater concern with reducing the learning load in each unit. That the content of learning is still thought of in grammatical terms is indicated by the labels used to indicate the items to be learned: the definite article, the position of adjectives, the past tense, conditionals,

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comparative and superlative, and so on. It is fair to say, therefore, that, whether or not it is apparent, most text-books have as their basis a grammatical syllabus.

The grammatical syllabus, however, is not without its critics. The criticisms come from a number of different directions. It is very difficult for many learners to appreciate the applicability of the knowledge they gain through such an approach. The process of being taken systematically through the grammatical system often reduces the motivation of those who need to see some immediate practical return for their learning. From another point of view, this approach might also be considered inefficient since its aim is to teach the entire system regardless of the fact that not all parts of the system will be equally useful for all learners. There is furthermore the danger that the learning of grammar will be identified with the learning of grammatical form and that grammatical meaning will be subordinated to this. Finally, there is the more recent criticism that the bringing together of grammatically identical sentences is highly artificial, since in real acts of communication it is sentences that are alike in meaning that occur together and not those that are alike in structure. The grammatical syllabus, it is argued, fails to provide the necessary conditions for the acquisition of communicative competence.

In recent years an alternative approach has been much discussed and this involves constructing not a grammatical, but a situational syllabus. According to this view language always occurs in a social context and it should not be divorced from its context when it is being taught. In any case, our choice of linguistic forms is frequently restricted by the nature of the situation in which we are using language. This suggests that it is possible for people to concentrate learning upon the forms of language that are most appropriate to their needs. This creates the possibility of a learner-based syllabus to replace the subject-based grammatical syllabus. (It should perhaps be made clear

that reference is not being made here to a method of language teaching - sometimes called "situational" - in which sentences are always presented in association with actions, mime, realia and visual aids. In practice this method is usually firmly rooted in a grammatical syllabus and the situations that are created are pedagogic, bearing little resemblance to natural language use.) The situational syllabus, therefore, is based upon predictions of the situations in which the learner is likely to operate through the foreign language. A set of parameters for the description of the significant features of situations is set up and a behavioural analysis is made in terms of these features. Learning units no longer have grammatical labels. Such a syllabus focusses teaching upon what is most relevant to a particular group of learners and these learners, able to see the relevance of what they are doing, become more highly motivated. The resulting materials will, of course, be linguistically heterogeneous, since natural situations do not contain language of the uniformity of structure which characterizes a grammatical syllabus.

How feasible is it to produce a complete syllabus according to situational criteria? In practice there are a number of problems. In the first place it is extremely difficult to define what a situation is. There are cases where the language we use is evidently very closely related to the physical context in which we produce it. But such cases are, if anything, atypical and we could not hope to cater for all a learner's language needs if we based our teaching on this type of situation alone. On the other hand, if the definition is widened to allow non-observable factors to be considered we reach the point where, "the wish to describe a situation is basically the wish to describe the world, reality, life itself."[3] Such a definition would clearly be inoperable. The conclusion must be that a situational syllabus is not suitable for a general language course, although it might be valuable in certain narrowly definable contexts of learning. In any case, the diversity of linguistic forms in any one situa-

tional unit makes the task of generalizing grammatical learning a difficult one and without it the learner may acquire no more than a set of responses appropriate to that one situation. He will be learning "language-like behaviour"[3] rather than language.

The grammatical and situational approaches are essentially answers to different questions. The former is an answer to the question how? How do speakers of language X express themselves? The latter is a response to the question when? or where? When and where will the learner need the target language? There is, however, a more fundamental question to be asked, the answer to which may provide an alternative to grammatical or situational organisations of language teaching, while allowing important grammatical and situational considerations to continue to operate. The question is the question what? What are the notions that the learner will expect to be able to express through the target language? It should be possible to establish what kind of thing a learner is likely to want to communicate. The restriction on the language needs of different categories of learner is then not a function of the situations in which they will find themselves, but of the notions they need to express. One can envisage planning the linguistic content according to the semantic demands of the learner. While there are, no doubt, some features of what may be communicated that are so general that no language learner can avoid acquiring the means to express them, others may be limited to people who will use the language only in certain fields. In this way the association of certain communication needs and certain physical situations is seen to be coincidental and those needs that cannot be related to situation can be handled just as easily as those that can. Furthermore, although there is no one-to-one relationship between grammatical structure and the notions they express, we should be able to take advantage of grammatical generalizations wherever these provide important ways of meeting a particular communication need.

What is proposed, therefore, is that the first step in the creation of a syllabus should be consideration of the content of probable utterances and from this it will be possible to determine which forms of language will be most valuable to the learner. The result will be a semantic or notional syllabus, which establishes the grammatical means by which the relevant notions are expressed. The lexical content of learning is partly derivable from the notional analysis, but it may also be influenced by pedagogic and situational considerations. Here I am concerned only with the grammatical realizations.

2. Background to the Present Study

In order to construct a notional syllabus we must have a set of notional categories. The categories I am about to put forward are those which may, in my view, prove useful for the particular context in which they were developed. I should explain briefly what this context is.

There is a growing awareness that the process of education does not stop at the end of secondary or of higher education. In an increasingly complex economic world every individual must expect to adopt new or changing roles even well after his conventional education has finished. He will also need to be prepared for the greater leisure provided by modern working conditions. Education, therefore, far from ending as the individual reaches adulthood, will remain a continuing process. At the moment provision for éducation permanente, to use the French name, is, to say the least, haphazard. In West European countries, in which there has been a good deal of discussion of the concept of continuing education, adult education is in the hands of a multiplicity of state and private institutions, with the mass media often making a contribution inadequately integrated with that of educational establishments. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the field of languages. Adults who wish to learn a foreign language may attend one of several types of state institution

which provide full or part-time courses, or they may go to a private language school which may or may not be officially recognized; they may attend courses provided by their employer; they may receive private tuition; they may follow courses broadcast on radio or television or they may subscribe to one of the many self-instructional courses available on record or tape. In many cases no recognized system of language qualification is involved. In others learners obtain diplomas and certificates issued by a diverse set of state, private, official and unofficial bodies, few of which operate in more than one country. There is little comparability between the qualifications and no provision for mutual recognition of certificates.

To anyone seriously interested in providing éducation permanente such a situation seems almost anarchic. Over the past few years a number of studies have been made which are expected to contribute to the development of a more satisfactory system of continuing language education on a European scale. The work reported here is a part of these studies. Broadly, it is hoped to devise a system whereby an individual requiring any European language, probably for some specialized purpose, will be able to study a set of units which are particularly relevant to his needs and on completion of these, he will be awarded a number of credits. Initially there will be concentration on the most widely needed languages and on the most widely felt professional and personal needs. A conventional grammatical organization to such a system is obviously not suitable and the specialized units will probably have a behavioural or situational basis. However, it is recognized that a common linguistic basis will need to be established and that, as has been shown above, not all language needs are predictable from an analysis of situational needs.

The notional framework which I am about to propose is intended to provide the means by which a certain minimum level of communicative ability in European languages can be set up. This minimum can then be taken for granted in the planning of the later, more

situationally oriented units. It also provides the means of ensuring the inclusion in the syllabus of communicative functions which have no unique grammatical realizations and no unique situational occurrence. It is argued that a syllabus for the teaching of any European language can be derived from this approach and that a syllabus thus expressed in universalistic terms can be interpreted according to the forms of the different languages to be taught and in this way a high degree of comparability between schemes for the teaching of different languages can be achieved. In the context of this study such a result is highly desirable.

3. The Categories of a Notional Syllabus

It seems convenient to group the notional categories into two sections. The first is made up of what might be called semantico-grammatical categories. These are categories which, in European languages at least, interact significantly with grammatical categories. It is for this reason, of course, that they contribute to the definition of the grammatical content of learning. There are six of these categories, each of which may be further sub-categorized:

1. Time
   - a. Point of time
   - b. Duration
   - c. Time relations
   - d. Frequency
   - e. Sequence
   - f. Age

2. Quantity
   - a. Grammatical number
   - b. Numerals
   - c. Quantifiers
   - d. Operations

3. Space
   - a. Dimensions
   - b. Location
   - c. Motion

(4. Matter)

Reference to the physical world is principally a matter of deciding the semantic fields within which the learner will operate. A notional analysis is less valuable than an analysis in terms of situation and/or subject matter.

5. Case
   a. Agentive
   b. Objective
   c. Dative
   d. Instrumental
   e. Locative
   f. Factitive
   g. Benefactive

6. Deixis
   a. Person
   b. Time (see above)
   c. Place
   d. Anaphora

There is no time to comment in detail on each of these categories, but, to illustrate how syllabus decisions can be taken within this approach we can look briefly at two of them.* Let us take time relations, for example. It is common for events to be related to the moment of speech and to one another by use of the verbal system. Although the most obvious logical division of time might be into past, present and future, these concepts are scarcely ever realized uniquely by verb forms (tenses). In addition, far more subtle time distinctions are commonly indicated by verbal forms - before past, after past ... and so on. In a situation in which one wished to teach a minimal operative system for communication, one might decide that in spite of the lack of isomorphism between logical and grammatical divisions, the aim should be at least to give the learner the means to express past, present and future time relations. In the case of English this raises further problems, since no verbal form is the only or the simple realization of these notions. Past events may be encoded in the past tense or in the present perfect and the choice is made according to the speaker's emphasis and view of events. In a minimal system the choice should probably go to the past tense, since its meaning is more easily acquired by the most learners and in some dialects the past tense can be used in some places where other dialects use the present perfect. With regard to future time, there is no future tense in English. The choice lies between various forms, the use of each of which is stylistically or grammatically restricted. The choice of the form to be taught as the initial realization of future time relations may depend on the anticipated use of the minimal system. Where, in a collo-

quial course, the "going to" form might be selected, in a more formal, written English course the construction with modal auxiliary "will" might be preferred.

Looking more briefly at the category case, we can see that I am concerned with the type of relations described by Fillmore.[5] These notions help to define the fundamental syntactic relations within sentences. Some of them are absolutely essential to the most rudimentary communication. For example, it is necessary to be able to express the notion Agent and, at an early level, the only necessary realization of Agent is as Subject. Equally unavoidable is the notion Objective and in this case two realizations propose themselves for early learning, the Objective as Subject and as Object of an active sentence.

The second set of notional categories can be very broadly described as categories of communicative function. They relate to uses of language where there is at best a very untidy relationship between the function of the utterances and the grammatical categories through which these functions are realized. They are also concerned with expression of the speaker's intentions and attitudes. They are most easily understood by looking at the list of categories:

7. Modality - i.e. utterances in which the truth value of the propositional content is modified in some way
   a. Certainty
   b. Necessity
   c. Conviction
   d. Volition
   e. Obligation incurred
   f. Obligation imposed
   g. Tolerance

8. Moral evaluation and discipline - i.e. utterances involving assessment and judgement
   a. Judgement
   b. Release
   c. Approval
   d. Disapproval

9. Suasion - i.e. utterances designed to influence the behaviour of others
   a. Suasion
   b. Prediction

10. Argument - i.e. categories relating to the exchange of information and views
   a. Information asserted and sought
   b. Agreement
   c. Disagreement
   d. Denial
   e. Concession

11. Rational enquiry and exposition - i.e. categories relating to the rational organization of thought and speech
   e.g. Implication, hypothesis, verification, conclusion, condition, result, explanation, definition, cause, etc.

12. Personal emotions - i.e. expression of personal reactions to events
   a. Positive
   b. Negative

13. Emotional relations - i.e. expression of response to events usually involving interlocutor
   a. Greeting
   b. Sympathy
   c. Gratitude
   d. Flattery
   e. Hostility

14. Interpersonal relations - i.e. selection of forms appropriate to relationship of participants in the event
   a. Status (formality)
   b. Politeness

Once again I can only indicate briefly the issues subsumed under one or two of these headings. The category of suasion, for example, includes utterance functions such as, persuading, suggesting, advising, recommending, advocating, proposing, exhorting, begging and urging. Within suasion, prediction includes warning, threatening, instructing, directing and inviting. Within modality, conviction covers the whole range from absolute certainty about the

truth of a proposition, expressed in the form of an unmodalised statement, through varying degrees of conviction and doubt, expressed through modal auxiliaries, lexical verb constructions and other devices, to complete lack of certainty. The point about all these categories is that these are the very things we use language for and yet they form only the smallest part of either the grammatical or the situational content of language courses. As yet, it is true, we do not fully understand how many of these functions are realized and it is certain that there is a good deal of linguistic diversity involved. Nonetheless the aim of language teaching is to teach learners to exploit their grammatical (and lexical) knowledge in creative acts of communication, so the possible difficulties involved in such an approach must be faced.

The value of the notional approach is that it forces one to consider the communicative value of everything that is taught. Items are not taught just because they are there. We aim progressively to expand the communicative competence of the learner. The set of categories just outlined provides us with a language for describing the communication needs of different sets of learners, whether their goal is a generalized or a specialized ability to use the language. Through this framework we can arrive at a set of learning priorities which is determined by the nature of the acts of communication in which the learner can be expected to participate. Information on the possible content of utterances will be of greater practical value than grammatical information and will be more complete than situational information. However, it will subsume both of these since each category has a particular set of grammatical realizations, and the aim of any syllabus would be, of course, to ensure that these were taught and situational language is just language in which particular notional categories occur with above-average frequency in association with defined physical situations. I believe that notional syllabuses will provide a path along which we can make new advances in defining the content of language curricula.

Footnotes

[1] See for example S. Saporta: Applied linguistics and generative grammar, (in A. Valdman, ed.: Trends in Language Teaching, New York, 1966)

[2] R. Richterich and H. Marchl: The concept of "situation" in the teaching of modern languages. Strasbourg. Council of Europe. 1970

[3] B. Spolsky: A psycholinguistic critique of programmed foreign language instruction. IRAL 4/2, 1966

[4] The framework presented here is more extensively discussed and exemplified in D.A. Wilkins: An investigation into the linguistic and situational content of the common core in a unit/credit system. Strasbourg. Council of Europe. 1972 (forthcoming)

[5] C.J. Fillmore: The case for case, in E. Bach and R.T. Harms: Universals in Linguistic Theory. New York. 1968

I should also like to acknowledge the contribution of H.G. Widdowson: The teaching of rhetoric to students of science and technology, in Science and Technology in a Second Language. London. CILT. 1971